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9 HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, December 25, 1931

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Subject: "Christmas Customs." Information in part from the Journal of Home Economics.

A merry Christmas, everybody. Aunt Sammy's wishes for all the good things that go with this best of feasts -- especially mirth and jollity, as the old-timers would say, and the finest of dinners to remind us of the times when Yuletide always meant roaring fires and feasting.

Do you remember those good old English verses about Christmas, written way back centuries ago?

Now all our neighbors' chimneys smoke,
And Christmas logs are burning,
Their ovens they with baked meats choke,
And all their spits are turning.
Without the door let sorrow lie,
And if for cold it hap to die,
We'll bury it in Christmas pye,
And evermore be merry.

Our ancestors back in those days had their own quaint ways of saying things and also their own quaint ways of spelling. I notice that pie in these verses is spelled P-Y-E.

Some of the best of our Christmas traditions and customs came down to us from early days in England. The Christmas revels lasted from Christmas Eve until Epiphany, with Christmas day, New Year's Eve Day and finally Twelfth Night as the high points of festival. There was a good deal of ceremony connected with all these celebrations, especially in the homes of the nobles.

Here's the way an old, old document or code of instructions describes the ceremony in the household of a nobleman in Shakespeare's day:

"On Christmas day, service in the church ended, the gentlemen presently repair into the hall to breakfast with brawn, mustard and malmsey.

"At dinner the butler, appointed for the Christmas, is to see the tables covered and furnished; and the ordinary butlers in the house are decently to set bread, napkin and trenchers, in good form, at every table; with spoons and knives. At the first course is served in a fair and large boar's head, upon a silver platte with minstrelsy.

"Two servants are to attend at supper, and to bear two fair torches of wax, next before the musicians and trumpeters, and stand above the fire with the music, until the first course be served in through the hall. Which performed, they with the music, are to return to the buttery. The like course is to be observed in all things, during the time of Christmas.

"At night, before supper, are revels and dancing, and so also after supper, during the twelve days of Christmas. The Master of revels is, after dinner or supper, to sing a carol or song; and command other gentlemen there present to sing with him and the company; and to see that it is very decently performed."

Isn't that a quaint old picture of Christmas long ago? When Uncle Ebenezer read it, he declared that every household today ought to have a master of revels to start the family singing Christmas songs.

In the same old document is a short account of the ceremony of bringing in the boar's head:

"The first dish brought in was a boar's head, carried by a leader of the guard, having a scarf of green and a heavy scabbard, preceded by two huntsmen, one carrying a boar spear and the other a drawn fencion, and two pages carrying mustard following, which seems to be as indispensable as the boar's head itself."

Where did all our Christmas customs and traditions come from, anyway?

They've been developing for centuries and centuries and have come from many different countries -- Syrian shepherds, the Wise Men from the East, old myths from the forests of northern Europe are all blended in the customs of medieval as well as modern times.

Christmas customs, some of them, actually date back to a time before the birth of Christ, for the ancient Aryans celebrated a Yuletide festival at this season 2000 years before Christ's birth. People of many countries have set aside the season between early December and January sixth for feasting and rejoicing, the lighting of great logs and the burning of many candles. Christmas still is called the "Feast of Light" in the Greek and Latin churches in memory of the pagan practice of lighting the weary sun god through the last dark days of his pilgrimage, and of starting him forth in the New Year with laughter and song. This was a time for forgiving grudges and for wishing the old god goodspeed on his journey.

Myth, tradition and folk belief have woven a web about the Christmas season down through the ages until today each of our customs has a story behind it.

There's the Christmas tree, for example. Where did that beautiful custom originate? Historians say that it came from the Roman festival called saturnalia. The Germans had Christmas trees many years before the English took up the idea. In fact, the Christmas tree custom was introduced from Germany into England by Queen Victoria.

As for Santa Claus or Father Christmas, who comes down the chimney and puts gifts in the children's stockings, he has a parallel in many different countries.

Gifts are brought to Syrian children by the Magic Mule, who can only be seen at the hour of twelve when he comes to leave presents. Syrian boys and girls keep their doors open and try to stay awake for the arrival of the mule, just as boys and girls in this country wait for Santa Claus.

In Southern France, as well as in South America, Mexico and Spain, the Magi Kings are the bringers of gifts to boys and girls.

In Russia the Baboushka or the little old grandmother, leaves presents for the children on Epiphany Eve. Like the Three Kings she is on her way to Bethlehem to visit the Christ child. She goes the length and breadth of Russia searching for him and knocks at every door with her staff. Then she slips up to each bed where a child is lying asleep and leaves a toy or a sweetmeat under the pillow in the hope that the child may be the Babe whom she seeks.

The Saint Nicholas found in most European countries is more familiar than the Magic Mule, the Three Kings or Baboushka, because we recognize in him the ancestor of our modern Santa Claus. The real St. Nicholas was supposed to have lived way back in the fourth century. He is supposed to have been wealthy and very generous and to have spent his life giving gifts to the poor.

In France St. Nicholas day comes on December 6, and the good saint is supposed to be a special patron of boys.

In Holland St. Nicholas appears in much the same guise as our old-time Santa Claus. He dashes over roofs with his reindeer and drops candies down the chimney for the children. Dutch children set out their wooden shoes filled with straw for the reindeers. St. Nicholas removes the straw and puts sweetmeats and goodies in its place.

The St. Nicholas that Austrian children know is dressed like a bishop. He comes to visit the children on Christmas morning. Each child sings a hymn to him, repeats a prayer and then tells of his behavior and progress in school. If the child has done well, the saint leaves gifts for him that night in his shoes. I almost forgot to mention Kris Kringle, who looks after the children in Switzerland. Good children find fruit and sweetmeats left for them by old Kris. But bad children are given a bundle of switches.

I'd like to tell you about many more Christmas customs, but I know that the Christmas dinner must be looked after in your house as well as mine. Here comes Uncle Silas who wants me to help pack his basket of packages for the children next door.

Next week I'll have several suggestions for New Year's meals and entertaining New Year's menus on Wednesday. But on Monday we'll have a talk on cooking with a thermometer.

